

## Community In Schools of Chatham County

By Kim Caraganis

Since 1989 Communities In Schools of Chatham County (CIS) — formerly Chatham County Together — has introduced and sustained multiple innovative youth development programs throughout Chatham County including community-based mentoring, Family Advocacy, Community Service/Restitution, and Teen Court. CIS serves children and youth ages 6 to 18 referred for services by Chatham County Schools (CCS), Department of Social Services (DSS), Division of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), mental health providers, and parents. Since 2014 and the launch of Chatham County's first CIS model school at Chatham Middle School (CMS) community members have recognized the value of CIS's evidence-based practices to support the academic, basic, and social-emotional needs of children at risk for life-long social and health consequence of school failure. With increased Chatham County School's support CIS is expanding this service to Virginia Cross Elementary (VCE) to reach the CMS students' younger siblings and their classmates (an expansion of 500 students). All six CIS of Chatham County programs meet the individual needs of children who face significant social and economic challenges to achievement in school and life.

The story of Alexis at right is just one of many stories that highlights how CIS longest running service — mentoring — can and does make a difference.

Kim Caraganis is Executive Director of Communities in Schools in Chatham County. [www.cischatham.org](http://www.cischatham.org)

## Alexis Peluso — Still Not Intimidated

By Anne Lazenby Allen

"She was a sweet, smiling, tiny child whose hair came almost to the ground." This was how former Chatham Middle School teacher, Alicia Shoup, described the 6th grader who waved to Alicia daily from the classroom next door. Curious to know more about the friendly student, Alicia sought information from school personnel, learning little Alexis Walton had experienced a "sad past" and was still living in what Alicia determined to be a "rough situation." Alexis had been severely neglected by her parents and had moved to North Carolina with her two siblings to live with paternal grandparents when she was four.

The grandparents were caring, but weren't always able to handle the three children. When she was about nine, Alexis started escaping to the house next door, where her friendly neighbor Michele Peluso French-braided her hair as they chatted on the front porch. After many visits, the Pelusos concluded Alexis was in need of extra attention, love, and the need to feel safe. Alicia Shoup initiated contact with Communities In Schools (then Chatham Together) to request mentoring services for Alexis, which her grandfather approved. Although Alexis was initially shy and fearful of the mentoring arrangement, the relationship with Alicia would soon become a lifeline. The weekly time together created a safe supportive space that helped Alexis through the death of her grandfather, continued strained sibling relations, and declines in her grandmother's health. While Alicia encouraged Alexis with her school assignments, she also brought lighter, more joyful moments to Alexis' week. She took Alexis bowling, to a day at Shakori Hills, to the Sonic for ice cream, and to the State Fair, where they met other mentees from Chatham Together! Alexis was only slightly above the height requirement to ride the Intimidator, a frightening ride with a steep slow climb followed by a sharp rapid drop. Alexis reports that while it was a bit scary, she was not intimidated!



Alexis Walton and Alicia Shoup

Her good fortune continued when she was adopted by Mike and Michele Peluso after the death of her grandmother. Even though she knew the Pelusos well, Alexis felt uncertainty about her new home and what the future held. "It took a while for Alexis to feel secure and to realize she wouldn't be tossed aside," stated Michele. With the change in Alexis' living arrangement and the birth of Alicia's child, the formal mentoring relationship was reduced, but the informal mentoring relationship continued with dinners, shopping trips, ice cream outings, Facebook sharing, and phone calls, and Alicia's continued encouragement with Alexis' school assignments.

Suspecting Alexis was more capable than the D's and F's she was making her freshman year at Jordan Matthews High school, the Pelusos engaged counselors and tutors to address Alexis' emotional and academic needs. Her grades steadily improved — by her senior year she earned all A's and B's. She and her older sister became the first in their family to graduate high school, both in the same year. Alexis credits her CIS mentor and adoptive parents with pushing her to excel in school — and to finish school. Alexis says her mentor came along at a time she needed someone to trust and to give her a break from a stressful home, and then the Pelusos gave her a stable,

loving home.

What does that future course look like for Alexis? Since high school graduation she has taken courses at Central Carolina Community College, has moved on from the Peluso home, and is currently employed as an Administrative Assistant with the Chatham County Chamber of Commerce. She hopes to pursue studies to become a nurse practitioner.

Alexis is grateful to CIS. Through the mentoring program and Alicia, in particular, she states she watched adults give of themselves to make life better for her and other children needing relief from difficult circumstances. She was inspired to focus on service-related clubs and activities her senior year in high school. She expressed a desire to "give back" to our community in the future, possibly as a mentor. From this somewhat shy, but strong, confident young woman, not intimidated by life, we would sure welcome the gift!

Anne Lazenby Allen, a Chatham resident and Board member of CIS, is retired from the Chatham County Department of Social Services.

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